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THE 2024 UNITED STATES ELECTIONS AND THE FUTURE OF THE LIBERAL INTERNATIONAL ORDER

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Economic and technological advancements have reshaped the dynamics of the international order since World War II. The United States has served as the guarantor of the liberal international order that has led to unprecedented prosperity and stability. However, rising challenges from political polarisation, apathy, and discontented rivals have resulted in gathering storm clouds of uncertainty. This paper looks at the apprehensions held by countries aligned with the status quo of the prevailing international order, considering what the future holds and what weaknesses its adversaries will try to exploit.

The United States is often thought of as a revolutionary state. President Biden even referred to it as «the greatest experiment in self-government»¹ when congratulating Donald Trump on his re-election. While such statements elicit raised eyebrows, Americans across the political spectrum embrace them, within the narrative of exceptionalism. President Biden was reminding them of this. Successful US politicians have always convinced their supporters that they are participating in a revolutionary movement. That is why American voters frequently place their faith in bold risk-takers, to the consternation of non-Americans, friends, or foes alike. Paradoxically, the United States also has a reputation for being a stabilising force. This dichotomy can bewilder, but it explains the contradictory political discourse especially salient in 21st century

presidential elections. Concerns about the idiosyncrasies of American politics are warranted. Is this a critical juncture in history, or merely a storm that will pass?

Where We Are Today

Since the end of World War II, there has been a surge in economic growth and overall wealth. Technology has followed a similar trajectory, facilitating commerce, personal and professional communications, and cultural exchange, as incalculable volumes of information now circulate the globe. Smart factories, equipped with robotics and automation, render the rank-and-file toiling worker practically obsolete, and crank out vast quantities of goods that crisscross the planet to customers. The extraction, storage, and exploitation of fossil fuels, essential minerals, and renewable sources of energy

1 J. R. Biden Jr., Remarks by President Biden in Address to the Nation. The White House, Washington, D.C., 7.11.2024. [<https://bit.ly/40iWMNH>]

have become more efficient than ever. Masses move daily between cities, countries, and continents for leisure, business, or as migrants seeking opportunities or fleeing disasters.

Navigating the chaotic norms of our dynamic modern society is a monumental task, inducing the establishment of a myriad of institutions, standards, and agreements. This is the framework of the liberal international order: The United States is this system's lynchpin, collaborating with other countries, such as members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) or Japan, South Korea, and Israel. These countries have become stakeholders, enjoying the luxuries of security and stability through the late 20th and early 21st centuries. The Cold War's ending facilitated the expansion of the liberal international order to most of the globe.



A deep-seated fear in other states is that the same challenges facing the US could also be lurking within their communities. Polarisation, isolationism and protectionism, widespread apathy, and distrust in governance and multilateral institutions

The United States, a nation of immigrants, abundant in resources, and technological, scientific, and informational expertise, has long been a source of inspiration, assistance, or protection. Currently, pulled unceasingly

to the political left and right, much of the population is apathetic to the rapidly changing world. A deep-seated fear in other states is that the same challenges facing the US could also be lurking within their communities. Polarisation, isolationism and protectionism, widespread apathy, and distrust in governance and multilateral institutions, are pressing concerns extending beyond those lands that stretch from the redwood forests to the Gulf Stream waters.

How Did We Get Here over the Long Term?

The stability of the liberal international order begets economic, political, and social prosperity. The benefits therefrom serve as justification for cooperation within a status quo that is inherently hegemonic. It is crucial for leaders of states to cultivate a domestic consensus supporting participation in the international order, as this facilitates smooth functioning, from the overarching systemic level down to the local level.² Consent cannot be coerced from abroad; history has shown hegemonic orders imposed on reluctant nations are destined for failure. The collective willingness of associate states and their citizens gives the present-day liberal international order its lasting strength.

Adversaries and challengers lie in wait, poised to exploit any signs of decline. The rises and falls in influence and capabilities are often viewed as zero-sum. Influential realist theorists claim this to be the keystone for understanding international relations.³

- 2 R.D. Putnam, Diplomacy and Domestic Politics: The Logic of Two-Level Games. *International Organization*, Vol. 42, No. 3 (Summer, 1988), pp. 427-460.
- 3 K.N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*. Addison-Wesley Publishing Company: Reading, Massachusetts, 1979, p. 70; R.W. Cox, Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory. In: Keohane, Robert O. (ed.) *Neorealism and Its Critics*, pp. 204-254. Columbia University Press: New York, 1986.; R. Jervis, Realism, Neoliberalism, and Cooperation: Understanding the Debate. *International Security*, Vol. 24, No. 1, July 1999, pp. 42-63.; J.J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. W. W. Norton & Company: New York, 2001.; W. Wohlforth, Unipolarity, Status Competition, and Great Power War. *World Politics*, Vol. 61, No. 1, 2009, p. 30; S. Charap, & T.J. Colton, *Everyone Loses: The Ukraine Crisis and the Ruinous Contest for Post-Soviet Eurasia*. International Institute for Strategic Studies, London, 2017.

In turn, certain state decision-makers internalise the zero-sum principle in their strategic calculations, making the theory a reality, at least, when dealing with these leaders. Consequently, disruptions to the system can be construed as threats to the prosperity of all its stakeholders.

While classic hegemony dictates that the hegemon issues commands to its passive client states,⁴ the liberal international order has a more symbiotic existence. Stakeholders in this system see themselves as fellow protectors of the status quo, not wholly reliant on the hegemon. Loosely stated, a liberal international order can be characterised as a civilizational bloc based on the universal principles of individual equality and rights espoused by John Locke.⁵ The core principle of this system is that political rights and civil liberties are guaranteed by the rule of law. Citizens subsequently confirm their rights and the sovereignty of the state by participating in representative self-governance. Their involvement in selecting representatives, creating and enacting laws, and adhering to those laws legitimises this framework.

The free market principles promoted in this system encourage individuals to improve their economic well-being. Citizens who have a stake in the economy, also have a stake in the structure of the order, safeguarding it against failure. When the free market works as intended, it yields higher-quality goods and services at lower prices. The government's role is to ensure compliance with food safety regulations, construction codes, and manufacturing standards.

Externally, the government conducts foreign policy on a multilateral basis, thereby enhancing the scale, volume, and efficiency of agreements.

The United States acts as the overarching guarantor of this system, deterring or defending against threats to its integrity. With the physical security assurance provided by the US, allied governments can concentrate on developing their infrastructure, public health and education services, and ensuring overall economic prosperity. These measures, in turn, enhance the legitimacy of these governments, allowing them to enact policies that uphold the existing liberal international order.



With the physical security assurance provided by the US, allied governments can concentrate on developing their infrastructure, public health and education services, and ensuring overall economic prosperity

Before World War I, the prevailing international order was organised around the regional balance of power in Europe, which was maintained through bilateral agreements that included favoured nation clauses.⁶ That system, marked by cycles of peace interrupted by particularly violent episodes of industrial warfare, extended worldwide through imperialist policies. European enmities also spread in concert.

4 G. Crane, *Thucydides and the Ancient Simplicity: The Limits of Political Realism*. University of California Press: Berkeley, California, 1998, p. 64.

5 D.A. Lake, L.L. Martin & T. Risse, Challenges to the Liberal International Order: Reflections on International Organization. *International Organization*, Vol. 75, No. 2 (Spring 2021), pp. 225–257.

6 B.A. Iqbal, N. Rahman & J. Elimimian, The future of global trade in the presence of the Sino-US trade war. *Economic and Political Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 2, 2019, p. 217.

Until the beginning of the 20th century, the United States followed isolationist policies, in part due to its aversion to the cyclical nature of peace and war associated with European imperialism.



Two key developments raise concerns about the potential deterioration of the international world order: retrenchment and political polarisation

Isolationism often coincides with protectionism. During this era, a heavily partisan and polarised United States Congress⁷ found common ground in both agendas. Congress and individual states wielded more influence over domestic politics than the executive branch at that time.⁸ This dynamic, along with the polarisation of society, contributed to the rebellion and secession attempts of the southern, slavery-supporting states. However, public attitudes began to change as interest grew in South America and along the Pacific Rim. The strengthening American naval power and other military capabilities complemented the change in interests. Inversely, as attitudes towards power projection rose, views on immigration tightened. Concerns familiar to contemporary discourse emerged: job security, unbridgeable cultural cleavages, criminal activity, and public safety. It took many years for the American public to accept the idea of the United States as an

interventionist world power. Reverting fully to isolationism, as has now been mooted, is also likely to take a significant amount of time. Nonetheless, worries about this are raising alarm bells among friends and adversaries.

How Did We Get Here in the Short Term?

Two key developments raise concerns about the potential deterioration of the international world order: retrenchment and political polarisation. The ideas of retrenchment materialised during the 2008 presidential election campaign.⁹ Public sentiment had soured towards foreign military engagements after the George W. Bush administration's policies were broadly viewed as failures in Afghanistan and Iraq. Global public opinion likewise condemned the United States for overstepping its bounds. Thus, policies of retrenchment were quite popular and garnered international support.

This inspired a lacklustre foreign policy under the Obama administration.¹⁰ First came the controversial strategy of 'leading from behind' to support primarily NATO states intervening against Libya's eccentric dictator, Muammar Gaddafi.¹¹ Despite their good intentions, these countries were woefully unprepared for a sustained military campaign, and less equipped to enforce peace afterwards. Meanwhile, Syria slid into civil war. Rattled by their Libya campaign, NATO countries became reluctant to take action without American

7 D. Brady & J. Stewart Jr., Congressional Party Realignment and Transformations of Public Policy in Three Realignment Eras. *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (May 1982), pp. 333–360.

8 M. Josephson, *The Politicos: 1856-1896*. Harcourt, Brace and World: New York, 1938.

9 B. Obama, Remarks to the Chicago Council on Global Affairs. 23.04.2007, [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a2r9rsewVRg&t=5s>]

10 M. Bose, Appraising the Foreign Policy Legacy of the Obama Presidency. In: Rich, Wilbur C. (ed.) *Looking Back on President Barack Obama's Legacy: Hope and Change*, pp. 93-114. Palgrave Macmillan: Cham, Switzerland, 2019, p. 102.

11 K. Marsh, «Leading from behind»: neoclassical realism and operation Odyssey Dawn. *Defense & Security Analysis*, Vol. 30, No. 2, 2014, 120–132.

leadership. Instead, Washington withdrew combat troops from neighbouring Iraq. In a disastrous turn of events, the Islamic State terrorist group, incubated in the chaotic civil war in Syria, overran much of western Iraq in the summer of 2014. Heinous violence, often broadcast on social media, and terrorist attacks in Europe forced Washington and their NATO allies to carry out airstrikes and deploy troops in both countries. Resuming military operations inadvertently deepened the public sentiment of war-weariness. This influenced later decision-making, when Russia launched the invasions of Crimea and Eastern Ukraine in 2014. Although retrenchment faced unfavourable circumstances for implementation, it was certainly a popular decision.¹² However, it set the United States towards a more isolationist future.

Donald Trump recognised the prevailing public sentiment during his first campaign for the White House, adopting retrenchment as his own policy plank. It converged with the broader message of refocusing the United States' attention inward. Like his predecessor, however, President Trump struggled to implement the policies he had promised.¹³ Nevertheless, the perception of Trump as the architect of American retrenchment marked a significant narrative reversal. Since then, the Democrats have

been linked with irresponsible involvement in foreign entanglements, an unpopular distinction.

President Trump also took advantage of an intensifying polarisation. In the second half of the 20th century, voters shifted to being independents¹⁴ separated into two categories: those focused on policies, and those who wanted to distance themselves from politics altogether. The former, known as centrists, have played a crucial role in elections, as candidates seek their support, realising that their votes can determine outcomes. Centrists are more likely to change their opinions¹⁵ and can lead to the moderating of policies from both parties.¹⁶ The latter are disenchanted, repelled, or exhausted by politics. They are unlikely to participate.¹⁷ From the beginning of the 20th century, forty to fifty per cent of eligible voters have not cast ballots in presidential elections,¹⁸ which is highly significant. Lower voter participation means partisan voices become more influential. Apathetic non-voters can prove decisive, but only if they turn out on election day. Both President Trump and President Obama were successful at converting people from this group into supporters.

Over time, the bases of each party have drifted to the political spectrum's extremes.¹⁹

12 A. Krieg, Externalizing the burden of war: the Obama Doctrine and US foreign policy in the Middle East. *International Affairs*, Vol. 92, No. 1, 2016, p. 103.

13 M. O'Reilly & W.B. Renfro, The Perils of Retrenchment: Barack Obama's Middle East Policies. In: Grossman, M., Matthews, R. E., Schortgen, F. (eds.) *Achievements and Legacy of the Obama Presidency: «Hope and Change?»*, pp. 141-160. Palgrave Macmillan: Cham, Switzerland, 2022.

14 B. Bishop, *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America Is Tearing Us Apart*. First Mariner Books: New York, 2009.

15 B.E. Berelson, P.F. Lazarsfeld & W.N. McPhee, *Voting: A Study of Opinion Formation in a Presidential Campaign*. University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1954, p. 316.

16 D. Diermeier & C. Li, *Partisan Affect and Elite Polarization*. *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 113, No. 1, November 2018, p. 280.

17 L. Mason, *Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity*. University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 2018, p. 8.

18 *Voter Turnout in Presidential Elections, 1828-2020*. The American Presidency Project. [<https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/statistics/data/voter-turnout-in-presidential-elections>]

19 M. Levendusky & N. Malhotra, (Mis)perceptions of Partisan Polarization in the American Public. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 80, No. S1, 2016, p. 388.



Certain moral and ethical transgressions are already dismissed as non-obstacles to electability in American politics. This results in lower quality candidates and outcomes for citizens

One reason for this is increased partisan divisiveness among elites,²⁰ whose prominent positions in society cue the average person with political messaging.²¹ Additionally, media outlets²² directly profit from polarising their audiences²³ by promoting partisan narratives. Finally, social media algorithms, designed to boost engagement, expose users to content that elicits strong emotional reactions.²⁴ Incidentally, more people are targeted by intentionally polarising political content.

Americans have increasingly begun to re-embrace prior political affiliations,²⁵ even

as a meaningful aspect of personal identity, like other traditional signifiers, such as geographical, cultural, religious, or kindred loyalties. Polarised elites, biased media, and social media algorithms are partly responsible,²⁶ as are traditional affiliations, gerrymandering, and familial influence.²⁷ While elections have always stimulated polarising sentiments, these feelings used to dissipate after the election cycle was over.²⁸ Today, election cycles seem to stretch endlessly,²⁹ preventing political attitudes from ebbing. Technological advancements, effective compressors of time and space, perpetuate this. Local issues now seem increasingly interconnected with broader narratives, disparities appear more pronounced, and feelings of insecurity are heightened.³⁰

Politicians take advantage of these conditions by appealing emotionally to personal identity. When joining a social group, individuals adopt the group's values and norms as models for their

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- 20 M.J. Hetherington, Resurgent Mass Partisanship: The Role of Elite Polarization. *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 95, No. 3, September 2001, pp. 621-623.
- 21 R.L. Claassen & B. Highton, Policy Polarization among Party Elites and the Significance of Political Awareness in the Mass Public. *Political Research Quarterly*, Vol. 62, No. 3, 2008, p. 546 & Zaller, John R. *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*. Cambridge University Press: London, 1992.
- 22 S. Iyengar, Y. Lelkes, M. Levendusky, N. Malhotra & S. Westwood, The Origins and Consequences of Affective Polarization in the United States. *Annual Review of Political Science*, Vol. 22, 2019, p. 135.
- 23 T. Bolsen, J. Druckman & F.L. Cook, The Influence of Partisan Motivated Reasoning on Public Opinion. *Political Behavior*, Vol. 36, No. 2, 2014, pp. 236-237.
- 24 S. González-Bailón, et al. Asymmetric ideological segregation in exposure to political news on Facebook. *Science*, Vol. 381, No. 6656, July 27, 2023, pp. 392-398. [<https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/science.ade7138#con1>]
- 25 G. Layman, T. Carsey, & J.M. Horowitz, Party Polarization in American Politics: Characteristics, Causes, and Consequences. *Annual Review of Political Science*, Vol. 9, No. 1, 2006, pp. 83-110.
- 26 S. Iyengar, Y. Lelkes, M. Levendusky, N. Malhotra & S. Westwood, The Origins and Consequences of Affective Polarization in the United States. *Annual Review of Political Science*, Vol. 22, 2019, p. 135.
- 27 L. Mason, *Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity*. University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 2018, p. 5.
- 28 N. Fasching, S. Iyengar, & S. Westwood, Persistent polarization: The unexpected durability of political animosity around US elections. *Science Advances*, Vol. 10, No. 36, 4.09.2024. [<https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/sciadvadm9198>]
- 29 G. Hodgson, *All Things to All Men: The False Promise of the Modern American Presidency*. Simon and Schuster: New York, 1980, pp. 210-211, 224. Trump declared his candidacy over 720 days before the 2024 election. See: C. Schnatterbeck, The United States' Perpetual Election Cycle Is Unique. *Foreign Policy*, 01.11.2024. [<https://bit.ly/3ZPHDBJ>]
- 30 C. Kinnvall, Globalization and Religious Nationalism: Self, Identity, and the Search for Ontological Security. *Political Psychology*, Vol. 25, No. 5, October 2004, p. 742.

own perspectives and behaviours.³¹ They also develop emotional attachments to the groups they join.³² As new members enter groups, they are exposed to slightly different attitudes and behaviours, which evolve within the group. This dynamic intensifies as more members become willing to accept harsher viewpoints. Ultimately, attachment to the political group can outweigh the policies it ostensibly represents.³³ This fosters an environment where defeating one's opponents becomes the primary objective, and policies take a back seat. Moreover, candidates «are less likely to be sanctioned for demonstrating incompetence, dishonesty, and unethical behaviour» under these circumstances.³⁴ Certain moral and ethical transgressions are already dismissed as non-obstacles to electability in American politics. This results in lower quality candidates and outcomes for citizens.



The Russian Federation presents the most egregious challenge to the liberal international order

Polarisation is not an issue unique to the United States or to politics alone. Overwhelmed by information, individuals make sweeping black-and-white judgments, rather than taking time to analyse how inbound information pertains to personal viewpoints. These heuristic techniques serve as coping mechanisms to manage the quantities of information people encounter daily. Nefarious actors provoke polarised

attitudes, believing that overall divisiveness supports their objective of undermining the hold of the broader international order.

Who Are the Challengers?

Although the liberal international order has benefitted some countries now viewed as adversaries, benefits do not always equate to satisfaction. These challengers do not have uniform goals or strategies. A countervailing universalist set of ideals to directly confront the primacy of the existing international order would be the starkest challenge. Communism attempted this but failed, as did fascism. China managed to observe enough of the requirements to be allowed to join the international order's framework, but the circumstances and scale of China's capabilities are not replicable for other countries. In its efforts to discredit the core principles of the liberal international order, Russia undermines institutions and subverts societies, by sponsoring targeted information campaigns, financing fringe political groups, and highlighting the supposed hypocrisies of states laying claim to higher ideals and moral authority in the world.

The Russian Federation presents the most egregious challenge to the liberal international order. Its invasion of Ukraine violated multiple multilateral agreements that are essential to the status quo's framework. Perhaps worried about admitting vulnerabilities to the system, the United States and allied countries hesitated to condemn Russia and offer assistance to Ukraine in 2014. The Kremlin elites view the US as their primary adversary and the

31 M. Brewer & R. Brown, Intergroup Relations. In: Gilbert, D. T., Fiske, S. T., & Lindzey, G.. *The Handbook of Social Psychology*, Volume I, Fourth Edition, pp. 554-594. The McGraw-Hill Companies, Inc.: Boston, 1998.

32 A. Gerber, G. Huber & E. Washington, Party Affiliation, Partisanship, and Political Beliefs: A Field Experiment. *American Political Science Review* Vol. 104, No. 4, November 2010, p. 720.

33 J. Benson, Democracy and the Epistemic Problems of Political Polarization. *American Political Science Review*, 3.11.2023, p. 3. [<https://bit.ly/4iQ8GFO>]

34 S. Iyengar & M. Krupenkin, The Strengthening of Partisan Affect. *Political Psychology*, Vol. 3, 2018, p. 215.

architect of the liberal international order. In their view, most European countries are subordinate states bound to the will of the United States. This narrative can be spun variously, but it is thought that bringing down the system will take down its architect. As such, any lasting settlement with Russia is unlikely.

Exploiting the weakness and uncertainty associated with the United States becoming conspicuously less engaged is a common goal for its challengers. Russia acted in the knowledge that notions of unipolarity were in decline, coinciding with signs of retrenchment from Washington. Moscow has since fostered alliances with opponents of the international order. North Korea, for example, has sent soldiers to fight alongside Russia in Ukraine, and has provided stockpiles of artillery shells, rockets, and ballistic missiles.³⁵ Similarly, Iran has enabled Russia to produce the kamikaze drones used daily against Ukraine.³⁶ Russia's geopolitical strategy also includes supporting rogue governments in Syria and Venezuela and acquiring mineral deposits,³⁷ selling weapons and oil,³⁸ and spreading anti-western sentiments in the African Sahel.³⁹

Iran uses proxy forces in various parts of the Middle East to escalate tensions at low risk of retaliation. Tehran may have overplayed

its hand recently, as Israel and Iran have exchanged direct salvos amid the ongoing conflicts in Gaza and Lebanon. Iran's precise role in instigating the current hostilities is unknown. Still, it has supported Hamas materially and financially, and its influence over the Houthi movement and Hezbollah is well-documented.⁴⁰ Iran's objectives include provoking global public opinion against Israel and its supporters, imposing substantive costs on those same countries, and generally challenging the international order.

Disrupting the system's status quo is not viewed as prudent by everyone. Three of the BRICS nations – Brazil, India, and South Africa – maintain positive relations with the proponents of the liberal international order. Brazil and South Africa see the BRICS group as a means to advance their interests, complementing the agreements they have with the prevailing order. India shares a similar perspective but with the additional concern of countering China's growing influence and ambitions.⁴¹ New Delhi is wary of Beijing using the BRICS nations as its vehicle to position itself as the champion of the Global South. Consequently, India supports further expansion of the organisation, where it wields considerable influence and can promote its multilateral character.

35 B. Cole, *North Korean Troops Give Kim 'Leverage' Amid Putin's Ominous Korea Warning*. Newsweek, 15.11.2024. [<https://www.newsweek.com/south-korea-north-korea-russia-putin-1985186>]

36 E. Burrows & L. Hinnant, *Africans recruited to work in Russia say they were duped into building drones for use in Ukraine*. Associated Press, 10.10.2024. [<https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-war-drones-shahed-africans-11602ab837f0ff4635926d884b422185>]

37 *The Blood Gold Report: How the Kremlin is using Wagner to launder billions in African gold*, December 2023. [<https://bloodgoldreport.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/The-Blood-Gold-Report-2023-December.pdf>]

38 O. Ricketts & M. Amin, *Sudan war: Russia hedges bets by aiding both sides in conflict*. Middle East Eye, 6.05.2024. [<https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/russia-sudan-war-saf-rsf-hedges-bets-both-sides-support>]

39 M. Ferragamo, *Russia's Growing Footprint in Africa*. Council on Foreign Relations, 28.12.2023. [<https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/russias-growing-footprint-africa>]

40 T. Johnston et al. *Could the Houthis Be the Next Hizballah? Iranian Proxy Development in Yemen and the Future of the Houthi Movement*. RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, California, 2020. [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2551.html]

41 A. Gabuev & O. Stuenkel, *The Battle for the BRICS*. Foreign Affairs, 24.09.2024. [<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/russia/battle-brics>]

Although reasonably satisfied with an international order that has facilitated its prosperity through manufacturing and exports, China sees changes on the horizon. Protectionist policies aimed at China by President Trump and continued under President Biden indicate that the two parties hold similar views towards Beijing.⁴² Sanctions against Chinese government-backed corporations, such as Huawei,⁴³ also enjoy broad bipartisan support.⁴⁴ Furthermore, revelations about spying, theft, and influence operations in the United States⁴⁵ damaged the relationship between the countries further. China's one-time advantages of having a large labour force, a lower cost of living, and less regulation no longer provide a significant competitive advantage, as advancements in robotics, automation, artificial intelligence, and machine learning reduce labour requirements for global manufacturing.⁴⁶ Cost-efficient, high-quality manufacturing centres can now be established in nearly any locale.

For the Chinese populace, the long era of humiliation and exploitation by foreign powers has finally come to an end. This patriotic sentiment serves as a pillar of legitimacy for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). However, the Chinese people have grown accustomed to taking pride in their

country, and an unforeseen incident that damages China's image could result in the CCP becoming a scapegoat. The strategic rivalry with the United States presents this risk, if confronted prematurely. A miscalculation, such as a botched invasion of Taiwan, could entail significant technological, economic, and military setbacks, potentially reigniting a sense of humiliation: a catalyst for a dangerous shift in public opinion.



In Chinese geopolitical thinking, time is viewed as an ally, contrasting with Russia's seemingly urgent and impatient motivation

Taiwan holds considerable strategic military importance. Controlling it would punch a hole in the so-called 'first island chain' that separates mainland Asia from the Pacific Ocean.⁴⁷ Speculation regarding China's superpower status must first account for navigating this obstacle. Lessons have surely been learned from Russia's wartime shortcomings in manufacturing, communications, and logistics. Capturing Taiwan would require a seaborne landing and resupply operation. An assertive

42 T. Wiesenmayer, The Fight for Economic and Digital Supremacy in the New Bipolar World Order: The EU's Response to Global Challenges. In: Karalekas, D., Liu, F., & Moldicz, C. (eds.) *Middle-Power Responses to China's BRI and America's Indo-Pacific Strategy: A Transformation of Geopolitics*, pp. 179–196. Emerald Publishing, Ltd.: Bingley, United Kingdom, 2022, p. 178.

43 T.M. Cheung, Fortifying China: *The Struggle to Build a Modern Defense Economy*. Cornell University Press: Ithaca, New York, 2009, p. 216.

44 I. King & D. Wu, *Huawei Building Secret Network for Chips, Trade Group Warns*. Bloomberg, 23.08.2023. [<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-08-23/huawei-building-secret-chip-plants-in-china-to-bypass-us-sanctions-group-warns>]

45 D. Alderman & J. Ray, Artificial Intelligence, Emerging Technologies, and China-US Strategic Competition. In: Cheung, T. M. & Mahnken, T.G. (eds.) *The Gathering Pacific Storm: Emerging US-China Strategic Competition in Defense Technological and Industrial Development*, pp. 179–210. Cambria Press: Amherst, New York, 2018.

46 M. Beckley, China's Century? Why America's Edge Will Endure. *International Security*, Vol. 36, No. 3 (Winter 2011/12), p. 53.

47 P. Mendis & J. Wang, The Sino-American Geopolitics and Geo-Economics from Taiwan to Sri Lanka and beyond. In: Karalekas, D., Liu, F., & Moldicz, C. (eds.) *Middle-Power Responses to China's BRI and America's Indo-Pacific Strategy: A Transformation of Geopolitics*, pp. 105–127. Emerald Publishing, Ltd.: Bingley, United Kingdom, 2022, p. 108.

foreign policy also invites backlash from its neighbours, due to their historical relationships via the tribute system.⁴⁸ This backlash has already been seen in the South China Sea, where Vietnam, despite its past enmity, has deepened ties with the United States as an offshore balancing power.



Countries like Iran and Russia see the American-led order as an invasive subversion of sovereignty, and are likely to continue challenging the foundations of the liberal international order

Another significant historical tradition for China is its belief in steadfastness. In Chinese geopolitical thinking, time is viewed as an ally, contrasting with Russia's seemingly urgent and impatient motivation. China aims to develop trade, energy, and digital infrastructure corridors through its well-known Belt and Road Initiative, but it also uses soft power influence. Achieving these goals would take many years under the best regional and global geopolitical conditions. Russian schemes to upend the entire international system do not resonate with China's traditional deference to order and patience. Furthermore, in less developed countries, disrupting the status quo can have dire consequences for social cohesion.⁴⁹ Chaos, quite simply, does not appeal to the Chinese.

China is similarly cautious about multipolarity. Multipolarity can heighten nationalist tendencies, potentially leading to protective tariffs directed at Chinese exports.

Moreover, Chinese minorities, particularly in Southeast Asia, could be vulnerable to racist policies stoked by nationalism. Expensive arms races in multiple theatres are another possibility. Japan and South Korea might even acquire nuclear weapons. Questions also arise about the trustworthiness of alliances in a multipolar world. Emboldened by an alliance with China, Russia would likely further undermine European cohesion. China's business, investment, and institutional partners would not react kindly. In both the long and short term, China prefers a system with more stability.

Conclusion

The significance of the American presidential election in international affairs cannot be overstated, given the worldwide influence of the United States on economic, political, commercial, and social landscapes. The varied congratulatory, critical, and cautionary responses from world leaders, prominent individuals, and everyday citizens regarding the re-election of Donald Trump in 2024 should be understood in this context. For three generations, the United States has been a cornerstone of the multilateral institutions, security alliances, and trade agreements that frame the liberal international order. Going forward, however, stakeholders in the international order must now consider the possibility that the United States may no longer be a strong patron.

At the end of the Cold War, bigger-picture questions were not confronted, due to the belief in the dawning of a unipolar world⁵⁰ or even 'the end of history'.⁵¹ Now, the pivotal question of what role the United States will play in the future looms large.

48 D. Shambaugh, U.S.-China Rivalry in Southeast Asia: Power Shift or Competitive Coexistence? *International Security*, Vol. 42, No. 4 (Spring 2018), p. 114.

49 S.D. Krasner, State Power and the Structure of International Trade. *World Politics*, Vol. 28, No. 3 (April 1976), p.319.

50 R. Nixon, *Seize the Moment: America's Challenge in a One-Superpower World*. Simon & Schuster: New York, 1992.

51 F. Fukuyama, *End of History and the Last Man*. Free Press: New York, 1992.

One important ongoing debate is whether the liberal international order is eroding or even being displaced by a new multipolar framework. Multipolarity, it would seem, favours older balance-of-power dynamics, leading to a messier, more unstable world.⁵² Nevertheless, adversarial governments view the universal philosophical underpinnings of the international order with deep suspicion, potentially even as an existential threat. Countries like Iran and Russia see the American-led order as an invasive subversion of sovereignty, and are likely to continue challenging the foundations of the liberal international order. In contrast, China may seek some form of conciliatory arrangement.

The international order has faced and overcome, or at least mitigated, numerous challenges over the years, so there is reason to be optimistic. At the systemic level, the international order embodies the ideals and values of liberalism, which has thus far been the most successful system at engendering prosperity and reducing social unrest. While critics of the existing order often highlight its shortcomings, there is a lack of viable alternatives. The retrenchment policies of the United States may embolden nefarious actors, but they could also create new opportunities for regional organisations, such as the European Union, to enhance their roles and reduce reliance on a single hegemon. Such a shift would likely be welcomed by the American public, who are experiencing hegemon fatigue.



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How they deal with the challenge of polarisation may indicate how other countries dealing with the same problem will fare. Oddly enough, polarisation has made elected representatives more responsive to the opinions of their constituents. Once the pendulum of norms and values swings back towards consensus-building, politicians are likely to follow suit. This gives hope for a new era of international prosperity and cooperation.

We just need to navigate this challenging patch of rough water.

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⁵² J. Mearsheimer, Back to the Future: Instability in Europe After the Cold War. *International Security*, Vol. 15, No. 1, 1990, pp. 5-56.

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